

GUNDOGS

BY BILL McCLURE

The Brittany

One of the most popular American gundogs, the Brittany, is also the only pointing spaniel breed in the world. The Brittany has attained a secure place in the homes of hunters across North America because they were looking for a smaller, family-style pointing dog that was easy to train.

Unlike the misfortune visited upon some breeds introduced to North America, the dog press did not hype the Brittany up to be the greatest French gift to the United States since the Statue of Liberty. Instead, most early writers described a conservative, buoyant, compact gundog standing about 20 inches at the shoulder and weighing around 35 pounds. The most frequent coloration is a white background with orange or liver ears, head markings, and body spots. Their coat is just heavy enough to withstand brush and briars but sheds burrs easily. They have little feathering. Most are born with a long tail which is commonly docked soon after birth to a mature length of about four inches.

The whole Brittany package fits into the backseat of a compact car along with the children and a car seat. That is one of the reasons the breed has been such a hit. Another is that they are very birdy, biddable, people-oriented, and easily trained. The motto of the breed club is: "A little correction and a lot of affection," which just about sums up the way one helps a Brittany to learn. They thrive on family life, children, patience, and firmness.

Modern Brittanies hunt with speed and a fairly wide range in the open but are more restricted in the woods and brush. They adapt their ground coverage to the conditions and are anxious to know where you are and what you think of their performance. Some writers have argued that all Brittanies will naturally

point birds, and that the trick is to get them to get out and hunt for game. In 35 years of owning Brittanies I have not experienced such a problem, but I have owned a few where the challenge was to get them to stay in the same concession I was in. In spite of what you may read, an "underfoot" Brittany is the exception even to this day.

Certainly the field trial game has fostered a bigger-running tougher-minded dog than we saw in the 1950s, but there



Photo By NRA Staff

The Brittany is the only member of the spaniel family with a natural instinct to point, and most will prove to be reliable, soft-mouthed upland retrievers as well.

are still hundreds of people who raise the breed for Saturday shooting. These breeders often use the bloodlines of major field trial winners, and the results commonly produce a typical Brittany gundog. Make no mistake about it, you won't be tripping over them. But rarely will you have to send out the national guard to find them either. The breed's basic genetic pattern does seem to prevail, but I would still caution prospective owners, as in any puppy purchase, to choose the breeder of your Brittany with a view to your needs.

There are Brittanies in places like Oklahoma or Kansas or Saskatchewan that have been bred for excessive size, range, and speed, but there are breeders in New Hampshire who for 40 years have bred and raised Britts for woodcock shooting. The breed's genetics go back to type.

In spite of its sweet temperament and desire to please, a typical Brittany doesn't simply train itself. Above all it needs experience with birds and encouragement to get about its instinctual work. Once the wonders of game birds are revealed, some moderate pressure is necessary to mold the pupil. They seem to do best with an owner who doesn't come down like a ton of bricks on them but remains calm and patient.

A typical Brittany's greatest attribute is that he loves you unreservedly and will work for you at all times under all conditions. He will also love everyone else. They don't make particularly happy kennel dogs, preferring the hearth, and people to tell them how wonderful they are. They are not watchdogs.

Although fundamentally an upland pointing dog, the ones I have known have had a very strong and natural soft-retrieving instinct. I have never had to force break one to fetch game back to me. Most Brittanies I have known have also enthusiastically fetched back puddle ducks I have shot.

But although the breed is clearly one of the versatile gundogs, my experience is that there are other breeds that are more adept at the diverse upland tasks of pointing, trailing, tracking, and land and water retrieving. Nevertheless I can count on the fingers of one hand the birds we have lost in a lifetime.

In recent years in both Canada and the United States there have been many new importations of Brittany spaniels from France. Some of these have been touted as the Second Coming itself. The ones I have seen have been fine dogs, closer working than their American counterparts and frequently sporting black noses or black on their coats. This color is acceptable in France but is a disqualification under the American and Canadian Kennel Clubs. There is a move afoot in Canada to register both the American and the French, in the Canadian Kennel Club. *C'est la guerre!*

A Brittany is not everyone's gundog. He certainly is the wrong dog for an impatient or short-tempered hunter. Nor is he the best choice for someone who hunts more waterfowl than upland birds. But if your approach to bird shooting and life has an element of Gaelic fatalism and lightness of spirit, then this may be the dog for you.

Almost since the first importations, a strong and devoted group of owners banded together to form the American Brittany Club. This breed association is a reliable source of knowledge on the Brittany.

For information about the Brittany and Brittany activities in your state, contact: The American Brittany Club, P.O. Box 616, Marshfield, MO 65706; 417-468-6250. ■